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ABSTRACT

An appraisal of Clark Howell's career as a journalist and of his political involvement in his state (Georgia) and nation indicates a significance that history books have largely ignored. Born and raised in the Civil War South, Howell's essential regionalism led him to serve his state as a lawyer, a senator, and as the editor and publisher of the "Atlanta Constitution." Under his guidance, the newspaper received its first Pulitzer Prize and was the training ground for newsmen such as Joel Chandler Harris and Ralph McGill. Howell was a close friend of President Franklin Roosevelt, and later Presidents from both parties called on him to serve on national commissions. Howell is significant in four roles: as a committed journalist with the ability to build a superior editorial staff, as a skilled orator, as a bridge between journalism and politics, and as a spokesman for the uniqueness of the southerner in the United States. (AEA)

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CLARK HOWELL AND THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

A paper presented at a Regional Conference

of the History, Law and Newspaper Divisions, AEJ

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> He is now 33 years old, and it may safely be said that what he has done in his profession is a mere experiment compared with what he will do. His mind is broad, conservative and sympathetic. He has an intuitive knowledge of the relation that even the smallest political event bears to the future. He has a complete understanding of public affairs. He is not a partisan in any sense but he stands for pure democracy in every sense. The work that his predecessors began he will carry on and make perfect, and the Constitution, under his editorial control, will continue to grow in power and influence, not merely as a newspaper, but as the organ and representative of the people and the people's interests.[1]

The words are those of a Southern newsman -- Joel Chandler Harris -- written in 1897 to describe a colleague who had just been appointed his editor-in-chief. The colleague was Clark Howell Sr. For the 39 years that followed, Howell was the Constitution's editor and guiding force, active literally until his dying days in 1936. But for some reason, Howell has been largely ignored by historians of all kinds. He is relegated to a line or two in the general media histories. The latest history of the State of Georgia mentions him not at all; Southern histories either neglect him entirely or say little of his life and work in relation to the life of the South or the growth of the Constitution. This paper will sketch his career as journalist and his political involvement in the life of his state and nation, in an attempt to make a preliminary appraisal of his significance.

By the fortunes of war, Clark Howell was born in South Carolina. His father, Evan Park Howell, was commanding a Confederate artillery battery in Tennessee. Mrs. Howell had returned to her home in Erwinton, S. C., when it came time for Clark to arrive, as he did on Sept. 21, 1863. His grandfather had moved to Georgia from North Carolina as a boy, and Evan had grown up in Atlanta and was educated at the Georgia Military Institute and the University of Georgia Law School. The Howells could, in fact,

trace their American lineage back to 1637, when John Howell arrived in Virginia from England.

Whether it is apocryphal or not, one tale of Clark's early involvement in the Civil War is worth telling. According to one source, he and his mother were at the Howell family home on the Chattahoochee River north of Atlanta when Sherman began to close in. According to Clark's sister Rosalie, mother and child fled before the Yankees. A cook baked some biscuits which Mrs. Howell folded in her apron, and, with a cow tied behind the wagon to furnish milk for the baby, the trio escaped. Rosalie maintained late in life that it was this incident, told to a family friend named Margaret Mitchell, that wound up as a classic scene in Gone With the Wind, in which Melanie tied a cow to a wagon as the O'Haras abandoned their plantation.[2]

There is little doubt about Howell's essential southernness, which meant so much more than it may today. His roots and family ties undoubtedly controlled his life and behavior to a large extent, but it does not appear that his regionalism restricted his personal growth or shackled him with a provinciality that kept him from larger service and recognition.

Let us look briefly at other biographical details before turning to observations on Howell's concurrent careers in journalism and politics.

Evan Howell, like many other Confederate veterans, returned to a desolate land at war's end. Atlanta lay in ruins, but Sherman's bonfires meant a shortage of lumber which Captain Howell turned to advantage. For two years he cut, sawed and sold timber from his father's lands before moving into Atlanta to become a reporter and then city editor of the Atlanta Intelligencer. He then returned to the practice of law and was elected a solicitor general and then state senator.[3] But he turned to

journalism again in 1876. On Oct. 17 of that year he had purchased a half-interest in the Atlanta Constitution, established in 1868 by Carey Styles. A chance meeting with Henry Woodfin Grady -- on his way to catch a train for a new editorial position in Augusta -- led to Grady's being hired on the spot by Howell. Grady, in turn, urged the employment of Joel Chandler Harris as an "editorial paragrapher." Howell assented, and this remarkably complimentary trio began to build the Constitution into a newspaper of regional and national reputation.[4]

Clark, one of seven children, completed his degree at the University of Georgia in 1883 and plunged into the world of journalism. His apprenticeship took him to the Northeast, first to the New York Times, where he worked under Henry Lowenthal, later a Times managing editor. From there he moved to the Philadelphia Press news desk, where he worked under Charles Emory Smith, later U. S. Postmaster General.[5] One of his reportorial assignments at the Press earned him national recognition. The aging Samuel Tilden had yet to make known his availability as a nominee on the Democratic ticket. Howell paid him a visit in Gramercy Park, and learned from the man himself that he was in failing health and would not seek office. The resulting story got wide play in leading papers across the country, and within a few weeks he was back in Atlanta. In a year he was night city editor of the Constitution under Grady. By this time, Grady was coming into his own as spokesman for the New South, and Howell's tutelage frequently must have been unsupervised. Still, he did work closely with Grady and the others assembled by his father and Grady in the editorial department of the Constitution. By 1889 Howell was assistant managing editor, even more heavily engaged in being the alter ego for Grady. When Grady died that year, Howell was a young but seasoned newsman, and stepped into Grady's shoes. Evan was ready to retire

in 1897 and Clark became editor-in-chief. For the two years previous to this appointment, "all editorial questions of whatever character" were "dispensed of by him."[6] Howell soon gained control of a majority of the Constitution's stock, and evidence reviewed so far indicates he pursued the task of editor and publisher with vigor, dedication, professionalism and enjoyment. The newspaper supported good roads and other causes, and spoke as moderately as was possible on racial matters. Howell was always involved in editorial decisions, and in writing editorials. His close reading of a routine city council story led to the newspaper's first Pulitzer Prize in 1931. A particular sentence in the story sparked a question in his mind. He followed the clue and his instincts, and wrote what was said to have been one of the finest editorials of his career. A reportorial investigation and a series of articles followed, leading to indictments of a number of prominent office holders. Several wound up in chain gangs, and others faded from the public eye.[7]

His newsroom involvement was legendary, though hardly unbiased. Ralph McGill wrote of his being called into Howell's office in early 1936, when Richard B. Russell's campaign for the Senate appeared to be foundering. McGill described the event this way:

> (Howell) asked me if I had not written politics in Tennessee. (I was then sports editor.) I said I had. He then told me that Dick Russell had opened his campaign for the Senate a few days before and it had not got off the ground. He asked me to join Gov. Russell the next day at his home near Winder and cover that day's speech at Royston. His opponent was former Gov. Talmadge. "In Tennessee politics," I said, "you write hard." "Just give me a factual story," he said. (Papa Howell carried a small bamboo cane. It was his habit to whack friends across their rear as he met them. He patted me on the shoulder as he spoke and whacked me gently across the rear as I left. "Just the facts," he said.)
>
> I recall that Major Howell (Clark's son, also active on the newspaper by this time) winked at me.

> The next afternoon I wrote about Gov. Russell lighting the watch fires of democracy on the thousand hills of North Georgia and of how the lights from their purifying flames burned away the darkness of demagogic distortions and destroyed the curtains of falsehood.
>
> It was days before I got back. I went in to see Papa Howell. He whacked me joyfully across my ample bottom and said, "Just what I wanted, Ralphie. Just what I wanted. Dick is going to win."
>
> (He did.)[8]

A newsman to the end, Howell wrote or dictated editorials continuously, including one celebrating the landslide victory of his good friend Franklin Delano Roosevelt in November, 1936.

Politics, it would seem, meant as much to Howell as journalism and the South. His grandfather was a one-time Atlanta judge, and his father a state legislator. It was no great surprise when he was nominated for the legislature in August, 1884, a month before he became 21. He was elected, and became Speaker of the House in a later term. He went on to the State Senate, and became its President.[9] Concurrently he became a Democratic national committeeman from Georgia, and a nationally known speaker, somewhat in the mold of Grady. When the 1898 Chicago Peace Jubilee climaxed with a dinner feating President William McKinley, it was the honorable Clark Howell who spoke on the topic, "Our Reunited Country," to which the President responded.[10] Many other speaking engagements can be documented. They included an appearance in Buffalo, N. Y., in 1899, where he spoke on the "Man with His Hat in His Hand," in New York City as the keynote speaker at a Grant Day dinner in 1901, and an address in Des Moines in 1903 at the 17th annual meeting of the Grant Club. The title there was, "Grant's Life as a Peace Lesson."[11]

Given his role as the editor-in-chief of a well known and respected Southern newspaper, and as a young and articulate politician, it is easy to see why Harper's Weekly commented after the Grant Day speech in New Yerk that he had "prospered in all directions, and been elected speaker of the Georgia legislature, which will send him in time no doubt, to the U. S. Senate."[12]

Howell's eye was not on the Senate, but on the Governor's chair, and it was in this race that he ran into a political buzzsaw. Georgia had long been dominated politically by the Bourbons who controlled the Democratic Party, and Howell was one of them. The continuing rule by the Bourbon element seemed assured when Howell announced in the spring of 1905 that he would be a candidate for governor in the 1906 primary. What he could not predict was the growing discontent with the Bourbons on the part of other Democrats, the fixation on the issue of disenfranchising the Black voters, and the campaigning ability of Hoke Smith, one-time owner of the Atlanta Journal and secretary of the interior for three years under President Cleveland. The race was as ruthless and vigorous as any in the history of Georgia. Smith, supported by Populist Tom Watson, spoke out for a state constitutional provision that would effectively end the Black man's right to vote. Perhaps the high -- or low -- point of the campaign was a debate between the two leading candidates in the Columbus Opera House in January, 1906. Howell opposed the proposed "grandfather clause" amendment, but not because he favored universal voting rights for Blacks. Rather, he thought the white primary and other mechanisms were sufficient as a control, and that the amendment would be found unconstitutional if tested in the U. S. Courts. Smith countered Howell's one-hour opening oration with an endorsement of the disenfranchisement amendment, and an attack on the Bourbon rule

of Democratic politics. Fears of growing Black voting power were kindled by Smith in the debate, and in dozens of other stump speeches. Thanks to the voting issue, party discontent, and a wide field of candidates which split the vote, Smith won easily. He received 104,796 popular votes and 312 county unit votes, to the 79,477 and 52 received by the other four candidates. Howell received only 23,006 popular votes and 12 county unit votes.[13]

He never ran for office again, but he never divorced himself from politics or active public service outside the field of journalism. He maintained his position as an active member of the Democratic Party, both in Georgia and at the national level. He corresponded regularly with every President after he became editor. His friendship with Franklin D. Roosevelt began sometime in the second decade of the twentieth century, and they wrote to each other on a "Dear Franklin," "Dear Clark" basis for many years. When Roosevelt began to visit Warm Springs, Ga., to engage in therapy for his polio-afflicted legs, the correspondence warmed up a bit more, and Howell visited the health spa frequently for chats with FDR.

Presidents of both parties called on him to serve on national commissions. Warren Harding appointed him to a National Coal Commission in 1921. Coolidge asked him to serve on a National Transportation Commission. Perhaps his most significant public service came in a totally unexpected and unlikely field. Because of his lengthy friendship and support for FDR, he had been offered a choice of several minor ambassadorships, in rather out-of-the-way places such as Turkey, but he declined. Later, when the Federal Aviation Commission was organized in 1934 to study the fledgling U. S. aviation industry, FDR reached out and named Howell to chair it. It was an off-the-wall, out-of-the-blue choice. As far as can be determined, Howell had never flown, or

shown more than minimal interest in the airplane and its role in American transportation. And this was -- said Roosevelt -- precisely why Howell was picked. He needed a man of ability, but one without commitments or preconceived stands on the issues. The choice seemed to be a good one, for in the end the commission, as a result of extensive hearings and investigation, put forth a list of recommendations which have, over time, found themselves accepted in one way or another.[14]

As indicated earlier, Howell was writing and editing as he fought the cancer that claimed him, and he dictated a victory editorial titled "The Path Ahead" to his chief editorial writer, Francis Clarke at bedside.[15] Ralph McGill, then primarily a sports writer, heard the news of Howell's death in the press box in New Orleans, where Georgia and Tulane were battling on the gridiron. He stopped his notetaking in mid-sentence, rolled fresh copy paper into his typewriter, and wrote an eloquent, two-column tribute to Papa Howell, his friend and editor.[16] Like many other McGill columns, it wound up in thousands of scrapbooks.

What has been set before you so far is a bare skeleton of one editor's busy career. Can any tentative assessment be made of Howell's significance on this and other evidence? Let me suggest a few possibilities.

First, he was a dedicated, enthusiastic and committed journalist, able to attract a superior editorial staff and stimulate it to carry out the day-to-day work. Because of his frequent absences he needed men and women who could operate in tune with his editorial concept of the Constitution. Men like Frank Stanton, Quimbly Melton Sr., Joel Chandler Harris and his son Julian, columnist "Bill Arp," McGill and many others did just that. Although the Constitution did not run away from its rivals, it stayed competitive in a newspaper dominated communications environment. It climbed

from a circulation of 10,751 daily in 1889 to 99,152 in 1937, although the Georgian sold 84,459 and the Journal 94,905 daily in the latter year.[17]

Second, he was a sought-after orator in the tradition of his predecessor Grady, and his best known successor, McGill. Although oratory is not a dead art today, it was a more crucial one in a world where first-person witness to the great speakers was not uncommon. His skill on the platform, learned perhaps as a student and legislator, gave him an opportunity to act as one of the spokesmen for the New South, picking up, in a way, where Grady left off.

Third, he was a bridge between his region and the nation, both in journalism and politics. His early oratory (though not fully analyzed yet) was in a conciliatory, heal-the-wounds-of-the-conflict vein. Much of the non-newspaper writing for the journals of the day indicates a recurring theme of the regeneration of the South, perhaps to the point of boosterism. His service on the Board of Directors of the Associated Press -- both the older, Illinois corporation and its 1900, New York state based successor -- kept him in touch with national journalism leaders. Many of them were heavily involved in partisan politics, as he was. From them he no doubt stayed in touch with journalistic innovation. They, in turn, must have come to respect him, his newspaper and his region in some measure, or the outpouring of expression on his death would not likely have had such a sincere ring to it. Presidential appointments to commissions may be a risky barometer of respect and ability, but the frequency with which he was called upon for service by presidents of both parties must say something about his national standing.

Fourth, Howell may well be the archetype of the spokesmen for the New South creed, and a representative of the uniqueness of the Southerner in America, along the lines suggested by Paul Gaston in his book, The New South Creed.[18] He was deeply involved in explaining and rationalizing the South to the nation, and was said to be instrumental in persuading Booker T. Washington to speak at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition. Washington's message there set white minds at ease, as he disclaimed for his race any aspirations of social equality. Howell called the speech a "platform upon which blacks and whites can stand with full justice to each other."[19] Thus, though he appeared to be a decent man and a moderate on racial matters, he joined others in perpetuating the separate but equal myth and postponed any beginning of full equality of opportunity for the Black man in the South.

Finally, Howell comes across the years as a warm human being, full of compassion and sympathy for all, yet one who enjoyed a drink, a cigar, a good meal, a laugh, and the camradarie of the news fraternity. One would like to have known him, and worked with him on the Atlanta Constitution.

FOOTNOTES

1. Joel Chandler Harris, "The New Editor-in-Chief of the Constitution," Review of Reviews, 15 (May, 1897), p. 560.

2. Capt. Evan P. Howell papers, Woodruff Library, Emory University.

3. Clark Howell, Geneaology of the Southern Line of the Family of Howell (Atlanta [?], 1930), pp. 16-17.

4. Raymond Nixon, Henry W. Grady (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1943), pp. 127-128.

5. Harper's Weekly, May 25, 1901, p. 545.

6. Harris, p. 559.

7. Atlanta Constitution, Nov. 15, 1936, p. 5A.

8. Atlanta Constitution, Nov. 20, 1966, p. 1+.

9. Nelson Shipp, A Vagabond Newsman (Atlanta; Cherokee Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 158-159.

10. Scrapbook, Box 1, Clark Howell Papers, Woodruff Library, Emory University.

11. Ibid.

12. Harper's Weekly, May 25, 1901, p. 545.

13. Dewey W. Granthem Jr., "Georgia Politics and the Disenfranchisement of the Negro," Georgia Historical Quarterly, 32 (1948), pp. 4-21.

14. Report, Federal Aviation Commission (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1934)

15. Letter, Bessie S. Stafford to Missy LeHand, White House, Nov. 14, 1936, FDR Papers, FDR Library, Hyde Park, N. Y.

16. Harold Martin, Ralph McGill, Reporter (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1973), pp. 51-52.

17. Figures from N. Y. Ayer's directories for 1889 and 1937.

18. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970)

19. Ibid., p. 212.